

**ADDRESS TO THE WOODVILLE HIGH SCHOOL YEAR 12
GRADUATION AND SPEECH NIGHT**

School Hall, Woodville, Adelaide

19 November 2008

**Peter Anderson, Old Scholar (1973-1977) and Chief Executive, Australian
Chamber of Commerce and Industry**

Lieutenant Governor of South Australia, Hieu Van Le

Meredith Edwards, School Principal

Mark Butler, Federal Member for Port Adelaide

Members of the School Governing Council

My mother, Susan Anderson

Former Scholars (including my former class mate now Flight-Sergeant Gregory Strudwick with whom I have just renewed acquaintance tonight after 25 years)

Parents and friends

School captains

And most importantly, today's students who share the same secondary school I did thirty years ago, and to whom I principally address my remarks,

When Meredith suggested to me earlier in the year that I could speak to this evening's graduation and speech night, I was genuinely excited. I still am.

To address you knowing that this is the final graduation and speech night in this original school hall before the next phase of school redevelopment is a particular honour. In some ways I feel I should acknowledge the hall itself, for its eyes and

ears have seen much and heard much over the years. I feel a particular burden associated with this privilege, having just heard our principal and school captains list the names of some of our notable former scholars in the field of business, sport, the media and public and community service who have come through here, and the history of this hall.

Why was I excited those months ago when invited to address you? It comes down to this. It's not actually about academia; it's not that I was some special scholar or had some great conversion at school here that I want to tell you about; no, the reason why I am pleased to be here is something simpler and more personal. I value my life and living, and respect all the good things that have helped make me what I am. Things like Adelaide, my upbringing and this school are part of what I value, what makes me, me.

To be able to say, with you, this is 'my' school even though we have never met each other, is special.

I know that when you are in the middle of school work (especially if you are facing year 12 exams) it is difficult to value school in that way. It is easier to reflect and reminisce 30 years later. Just today I asked my daughter Emily (who is facing year 11 exams in a week) how she is going. She said nothing gushing about school or school life. Just a bit of nervous tension, and a feeling of wanting it over sooner than later.

So my first message tonight is that school life does not need to be spectacular and you do not need to be one of the spectacular ones, to make it important and valuable. It's your attitude that matters more than your capacity. In fact, I have learnt that a positive attitude and some mental toughness make you more capable than you think you are.

I started my schooling here in 1973 and completed all five secondary years including year 12 by 1977. This was just before the music school was built. But during my years a new library and science labs were built, and they acted as welcome air conditioned space during those hot Adelaide school days. The buildings and ovals were a little different from today, and some teaching methods were different. It was a big and fairly academic school.

It was at first a bit daunting. My brother had spent a couple of years here before going to Croydon to do technical schooling, and my mum ended up teaching a few of us religious instruction lessons.

I had been to Brompton Primary School, but only a few of us from Brompton came here. So I did not know most others. Classes were over 40 in size and there were more than 1,200 students, if I recall. I kept out of trouble, and was a bit above average as a student but had to work fairly hard to get good grades. Even getting to school was not easy. I either rode my bike up Torrens Road and then home to Renown Park, or caught a bus to Arndale, and walked the last 15 minutes. Sometimes dad dropped me off.

I did not make friends all that easily. I was a puny kid in those days. I tried to mix in. I was a bit frightened of getting hurt playing 'red rover all over' (do you call it that now?), but I joined in, staying on the edge of the rougher stuff. In years 9 and 10 I knew what it was like to be thrown on the shed roof at lunch time and left there until the caretaker came and rescued me, and to be locked in a locker or thrown out the fire escape of the prefabricated class rooms.

But I went with the flow, and between doing quite well in school work and playing sport I settled in.

And so, my next message tonight is, you don't need to be the biggest, or the loudest from day one to make a go of things. It is the same in the business world

where I work; you can achieve a lot with some hard work and generally fitting in. It does not all happen on day one. And if it does not happen on day one, there is day two, a day three and so forth to make a go of things. Make your way, at your pace, but persevere.

For relaxation, I ride push bikes long distances. A month ago in Melbourne I was in a 100km ride. At the start, plenty of people passed me, some your age. Some finished before me, but I knew a lot were going too hard too early. Slowly and surely, as we reached the 70, 80kms mark, I started passing them. So, ride your own race, think and plan ahead, and don't try to copy someone else. Using your individual skills and attitude is the way to achieve your best.

I have always liked to be involved. So as my school years went on, I became involved. I joined the theatre guild; we put on some great plays in this hall La Mama, The Crucible and Zigger Zagger come to mind. I was no actor, and no singer. Yet I was involved. It is somewhat strange to stand here tonight on these wooden boards only metres away from where thirty years ago I spoke the few words in my speaking parts in those plays, and to still recall some of them. I am pleased to hear that the Theatre Guild has found a new lease of life in the school in the past year or so.

By year 11 I wanted to be a prefect, and became one. A few of us students did not like the old fashioned prefect concept so we suggested that we be called student representatives. Eventually securing the agreement of deputy principals Mr. Brian Marsland and Mrs. Dawn Palmer, and that of our principal (the even stricter Mr. Ruben Goldsworthy), the Student Representative Council was formed in 1977 and I was one of its first committee members of that student executive.

I should add that I pass on my very best wishes to Mrs. Palmer who, as we have heard, is not well enough to be here this evening. And I also wish to

acknowledge Mr. Marsland, who also has been so pivotal in the history of the school and the work of the Old Scholars Association. I wish them both very well.

This was always a very sporting school, with a rich reputation in hockey in particular. I played a bit of cricket, was an average batsman on our turf pitch. I was too fragile for footy, but when in University I became a footy umpire in the district. Our student council organised some sporting events but not everything went to plan. I remember taking the microphone one lunch time when we had races in the year 12 quadrangle. Instead of telling students to step back off the course, I mistakenly was calling on students to move onto the course. No wonder it was bedlam. We also organised some concerts – one with rock band Cold Chisel and singer Jimmy Barnes here in the hall. I seem to recall some of the teachers thought it was a bit loud, but none of us were to know the band was to become a music legend. I am also reminded that we had Skyhooks here, as well as the Angels.

Many of you might wonder, like I did, whether what I am learning is ever going to be useful in later life. As it turns out, that is the wrong question. My message is that not everything in life is useful in the same way, but it is all part of the one indivisible experience. There is good, there is bad, there is boring, and there is interesting. You need to experience most if not all, for you can't predict what you might need in future. Nor will life let you select only the best or most enjoyable. Indeed, unless you experience diversity, you cannot truly understand what you value most.

Let me give you a couple of examples. In year 10 we had typing lessons from a very vivacious, short, dark haired, red dressed and red lipstick teacher, Mrs. Thomas. Aside from the bigger boys in the class thinking the teacher was worth the lesson, most of us thought, what a waste. Who was to know that a few years later I like many others use a keyboard every day in my work. I thank Mrs. Thomas for teaching me to type.

An even stranger example is that in my first year we had to do a term or two of Latin. Latin was on the way out, but we had to do it. I don't remember much at all, except the lady teacher was old, like Latin. Yet as I did my legal studies I started to come across Latin words and concepts. At least I knew what language they were!

I was also taught French here, and thanks to mum, I still speak a bit of it. Since 2002 I have travelled overseas in Europe where I represent Australian business in the International Labour Organisation. Staying on the border of France and the French speaking part of Switzerland means it is very useful to speak my school-boy French. Thanks again, Woody High and those French camps out at Mambray Creek.

There are a few other notable mentions I should make about my school life here. Things became a bit controversial in 1974. I remember one of the girls in my class Jacqueline Wilcox was expelled by the principal Mr. Goldsworthy. It all became very political inside the school and out, and there was actually a strike by some of the students on the oval here in Leslie Street. I did not get involved, but it was big news. It is an add footnote that much of my career since has been involved in helping businesses avoid industrial relations strikes.

It was also here in school that I learned poetry, and it is interesting how some things stay with you. In quieter moments I still today remember words from the poems I was taught at school, and it calms my mind. Perhaps it is the same with you; if not a poem, a song or a tune. I especially recall the dramatic WWI poetry of Sassoon, Brooke and Wilfred Owen, and the evocative love poetry of Englishman and cleric John Donne.

Aside from my friends from Brompton Primary (Barry and Peter Mitchell), I joined in with a good group of friends as I moved through years 10, 11 and 12 (Trevor

Bailey, Greg Strudwick, Hans Raets, Dave Walters, George Amiss). They were into chemistry, and after school we would go to Trevor's place in Woodville North to listen to music and experiment further with some of the physics and chemistry practicals, and see what explosion the boys could cook up. The group even formed a secret society sort of, I don't know if boys still do that, but we had our codes and signs, and I joined in – silly as it seems now.

My career now sees me living in the eastern States and working with business people and lots of politicians, in Australia and sometimes overseas.

I did not plan my career. All I planned was to do the best I could, and to be the best I could. And that is another message for tonight. There is no one path to achieve your goals. Studying here gave me grades sufficient to do law at the University of Adelaide. I did law because I wanted to complete the highest degree I secured grades for, to be the best I could. Practicing law then made me interested in helping business clients and also made me interested in the making of laws by parliaments and politicians.

I also want to encourage you to feel confident that you can do important things even at an early age, so long as you educate and skill yourself. None of this I did with money or fame, just work, in fact the aggregation of lots of little bits of work and study. It is from little things that big things grow.

I was young at 29 to be the executive director of a business group and doing media interviews and showing some leadership to business people twice my age. At 31 I was a partner in a law firm, at 36 I was chief of staff to the South Australian Premier, by the time I was 40 I was advising Australian government Ministers in Canberra, at 45 I was elected to represent Australian employers overseas and at 47 (earlier this year) I became chief executive of Australia's largest business organisation, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I am now 48, and there are other goals I am working towards.

So you can achieve a lot when you are young, but don't expect your goals to be given to you, or for them to be reached in one day, like a big lottery win. Work for them, and make your achievements yours, not someone else's.

I also want to encourage you to not let set-backs stop you reaching your goals. I have had my set-backs, as we all do. I had to leave South Australia in the mid 1990s and that was hard. Just last year my brother passed away suddenly. That was a shock. And three years ago I was diagnosed with an aneurism in the root of my heart and had open heart surgery. I could have been dead as little as four months later, so the doctors tell me. I still have the underlying condition that caused that, the Marfan Syndrome. Health problems can weaken your body and change some plans, but only you can weaken your attitude to life.

I remember standing on the oval here at school, and in my backyard at home and casting my eyes towards the wealthier suburbs of the Adelaide hills, and thinking, I am as good as anyone, I can do well too. Living literally on the other side of the North Adelaide railway line would not hold me back. I have never felt that there were limits on what I could achieve. I never felt less than equal. I believe fundamentally in equality of opportunity, just as I believe in seizing those opportunities. I put a lot of that down to my upbringing, and to what this school motto – ***ad astra per aspera***, reach for the stars, meant to me. I encourage you to embrace your equality, and take hold of those opportunities.

Many of you at school have parents from overseas. Maybe you were even born overseas, like my mum who was born in Egypt. My message is, in a figurative way, cast your eyes up to the hills. You can reach for the stars just like I have tried. I am a boy from Brompton Primary and Woodville High, with an immigrant mum, and a dad who was a mid-north farm lad who moved to Adelaide and worked in a demolition yard and hardware business a few kilometers from here, on Port Road, Beverley.

But let us ask one question. When we reach, what do we do? We stretch upwards. And when we stretch skyward, one thing happens. It is this - some part of our feet remain on the ground. Reaching is reaching, not jumping. To me, keeping our feet on the ground is just as important as the reaching. I have often thought of our school motto in that way – we aspire to goals but we stay human, we keep a sense of reality and friendship. We keep in mind what is important, being a good person, not the wealthiest person.

Just at the moment, we know things are getting a bit tougher in economic terms in the world around us. The other day in Canberra I was looking at lessons we could learn from the way past governments dealt with global economic crises, such as the Great Depression in the early 1930's. You all know that Barak Obama has just been elected as the next President of the United States. Well, I came across a speech that was given when another President of the United States was elected during a time of even greater economic difficulty, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In his Inauguration Address in March 1933, Roosevelt said to a nation ravaged by broken businesses, unemployed workers, lost fortunes and poor families:

'Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money. It lies in the joy of achievement, the thrill of creative effort.'

In many ways, our school motto says this very same thing to me. Achieve but keep your feet on the ground. Our school values are 'diversity', 'creativity' and 'success'. They are enduring – in his way they are what President Roosevelt said was the remedy to his stricken nation.

So thank you for letting me share these thoughts with you.

I congratulate everyone who has graduated this evening, and give my special acknowledgement to those who have received school prizes. I encourage those of you who will still be here at the school next year to apply yourself in the pursuit of learning and excellence, whether it is maths, music, theatre or sport.

I thank all parents for supporting your children. Parents matter. And I thank your teachers and principal Meredith Edwards. Above all, I thank the School for still being here as changed as it may be and become. You are keeping the values of diversity, creativity and success alive for the next generation of Australians coming from the inner north-western suburbs of Adelaide

For so long as that occurs we will have something in common, all of us, even though we may only know each other from a distance or for a short time. I wish you well. Enjoy this evening and your scholarly success, for it is yours.